DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 520 EA 024 931

TITLE	Speaking and Writing Skills for Educators.
INSTITUTION	American Association of School Administrators, Arlington, Va.
REPORT NO	ISBN-0-87652-182-0
PUB DATE	93
NOTE	25p.
AVAILABLE FROM	American Association of School Administrators, 1801 N. Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209-9988 (Stock No. 21-00240).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Effectiveness; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; Nonverbal Communication; *Public Speaking; Verbal Communication; Writing Improvement; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

For educators, effective communication is an essential skill. This booklet is a collection of ideas, techniques, and tips to help educators strengthen their personal communication skills. The introduction discusses the need for administrators to communicate effectively with various audiences, describes the components of the communications process, and examines nonverbal cues. The first section offers tips for effective public speaking, which involve planning and making a presentation, communicating with a hostile audience, and making one's talk memorable. The second section provides guidelines for developing strong writing skills, addressing the issues of knowing one's audience, writing for clarity, and revising the piece. A conclusion is that improving one's communication skills is a lifelong process. (LMI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED358520

Speaking Writing SKILLS for Educators

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

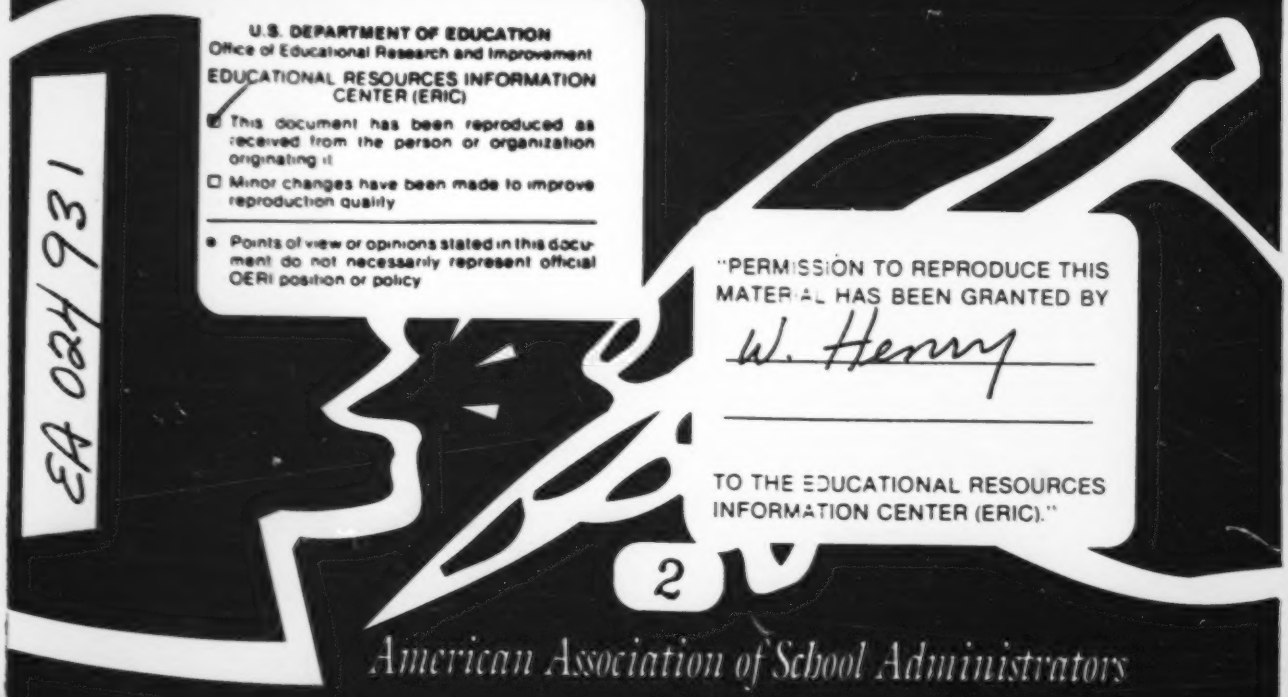
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

EA 024 931

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

W. Henry

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."



American Association of School Administrators

Copyright ©1993, American Association of School Administrators

AASA Stock No.: 21-00240
ISBN: 0-87652-182-0
Library of Congress Catalog Card No.: 92-74902
Copies of this and other AASA publications may be ordered
by calling (703) 875-0748.

3

Education ought to be in the business of communicating well to everyone. More than any other sector [of the economy], education should tell clearly and compellingly what it is about—its goals for children and for society and its dedication to truth and intellectual integrity.

***—Anne C. Lewis,* Phi Delta Kappan**

INTRODUCTION

A sense of community depends on shared information, shared feelings, and shared goals. We do that sharing through communication.

For educators, effective communication is essential. How else can we impart information and ideas to students, build community understanding, or listen to those we serve?

During a typical day, an administrator, teacher, or other educator might:

- Lead a class discussion
- Phone a parent
- Develop new curriculum materials with a committee of teachers
- Write a thank-you letter to a school volunteer
- Ask a fellow educator for advice
- Talk to a custodian about how to set up tables for the science fair
- Discuss an upcoming school board issue with staff
- Counsel a student having difficulty in a class
- Explain a new school or class policy to parents
- Speak at a community meeting
- Respond to a reporter's question
- Appear on a television program.

According to one study, educators engage in some form of written or spoken communication more than 200 times a day. But educators also must communicate with diverse audiences—parents, colleagues, board members, children, businesses, community members, and even people who don't speak English. Each audience has unique needs, as well as levels of understanding.

Th**e bottom line.** How well educators communicate with these audiences could spell the difference between success and failure for students.

William Lutz, an English professor at Rutgers University, once said: "The first job of schools is to communicate—first to students, second to each other, finally to the community at large. Through communication, you build understandin[illegible]"

This understanding shapes attitudes. In turn, attitudes influence behaviors, such as supporting or not supporting our schools.

Most educators already are good communicators—they have to be. Recent surveys, however, show that many would like to improve their frontline speaking and writing skills. This booklet is a collection of ideas, techniques, and tips to help educators strengthen their personal communication skills.

The Communications Continuum

Most experts agree that the communications process involves five components:

1. The **source** is someone with an idea to communicate.
2. The **message** amounts to the idea expressed in words and symbols.
3. The message is expressed through some **channel.** Selecting the right channel or combination of channels is vital to getting the message through.
4. The **receiver.** Of course, considering the characteristics of the receiver is crucial as you develop your idea, message, and channel.
5. The **message** causes some type of **effect,** an indication that the receiver did or did not understand, followed by feedback, or reaction to the reaction.

Communication breakdown. Where does communication break down? It can happen at any point along the continuum—with the source, message, or channel. Often, when communication breaks down, asking yourself the following questions helps determine what went wrong: What is the source of the information? Who is the receiver? Was the message clear and focused? Were appropriate channels selected?

For example, few parents attended an important meeting at school. Why? The principal wrote a letter inviting them well ahead of time. The announcement is well written and printed on bright paper. Perhaps some students (serving as the communication channel) forgot to take the flyer out of their backpacks until a week after the meeting. Or, non-English-speaking parents can't read the flyer.

Nonverbal Communication

As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "What you are speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you say." Body language, gestures, and facial expressions send nonverbal messages to your audience.

In fact, one study found 93 percent of a message is sent nonverbally, and only 7 percent through what is said. That's why nonverbal cues either reinforce or totally erase our spoken messages.

While most people are unaware they're communicating nonverbally, humans understand this type of communication instinctively. Here are some common nonverbal messages:

- Rubbing your nose and other nervous habits while you're stating a "fact" will cause people to wonder if you're telling the truth.
- Tightly crossing your arms and legs while speaking says you are closed to other ideas.

Barriers to Communication

George Bernard Shaw once observed, "The greatest problem of communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished."

Certain barriers impede both spoken and written communication. Ivan Muse of Brigham Young University, along with other researchers, identified these common barriers to effective communication:

Filters. You might have a hard time getting your message through because people have a different opinion or are simply concerned about other things.

Many times, educators or parents filter out negative information to avoid a confrontation or other negative situation.

Information Overload. The in-box may be so full and the demands so great that educators sometimes feel they can't handle one more piece of information. On the other hand, they wonder why parents, business people, and other community members don't pay immediate attention to their messages.

As educators, we need to be concerned about the information overload others are facing. Parents, for example, may not have time to read a 20-page report

(continued on next page)

about the district's math program, but they would be grateful for a three-paragraph summary in the district newsletter highlighting the program, along with a number to call for more information.

Jargon. All professions, including education, have their own special terms and lingo. This language is appropriate in some settings. When used among members of a profession, jargon promotes quicker and more accurate communication.

But an educator's goal is to communicate effectively with various groups, not to demonstrate a superior vocabulary sprinkled with unfamiliar terms. Resist the temptation to take something simple (desks, teachers) and make it complicated (pupil stations, classroom facilitators).

Semantics. The same words can mean different things to different people. When you talk about "disruptive behavior," do staff and parents understand? Do you mean simply talking out of turn or something more severe? Asking staff members to define frequently used terms—parent involvement, empowerment, achievement—reduces these semantical barriers.

- Staying behind your desk every time someone comes to visit may send a message that you aren't approachable. It also could mean you want someone to understand the role you play makes your ideas superior.

The open face and body.

Arch Lustberg, a communications consultant who frequently speaks to educators, explains some nonverbal actions that send positive messages. He says educators need to assume an "open face and body" when communicating.

A speaker with an open face, characterized by a genuine smile and raised eyebrows, projects warmth and interest. In particular, Lustberg stresses educators need to avoid the "neutral face," where only the mouth moves.

Open body gestures also create a favorable impression on others. Leaning slightly forward in a chair with hands at one's side says, "How can I help you?" When speaking at a podium, "extending the arms forward is a speaker's equivalent to a hug," Lustberg adds.

Words can sometimes, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds.

—Elie Wiesel, author

SPEAKING SKILLS

Tips for effective public speaking are plentiful. How well a speaker performs, however, is often controlled by his or her attitude toward making a presentation. Good speakers have the following attitude: My objective is to communicate my message clearly and naturally, not to impress the audience.

Some of the best speeches occur during animated conversation with others. The trick is to elevate that type of performance to other audiences, whether it is one person or hundreds of people listening at a public meeting.

Planning Your Presentation

Understand the audience.
Find out about the people you'll be addressing beforehand:

- How many people will be in the audience?
- How much do they know or care about your topic?
- Why did this group ask you to speak?
- Has anything happened recently you need to know about?
- What can you find out that will help you relate to the group?

Always Prepare

Before stepping in front of the podium, remember these last-minute speaking tips:

Don't be late. Use as many double-check techniques as you can think of to get to your speech on time—and unflustered.

Wear comfortable clothes. Speakers should wear familiar clothes they know they can move around in easily.

Conquer nervousness by pretending you're back in the classroom. Educators should use the fact that they're accustomed to standing in front of classes to get over the jitters. Approach your speech as if you're preparing a well-organized lesson plan.

Remember—practice makes perfect. The more you speak, the better you'll get.

Source: *The Executive Educator*, August 1983.

Conducting background research on your audience could mean a trip to the library, a visit with someone who can share information and anecdotes, or a review of your own experiences. Surveys and census results also can provide demographic statistics.

Familiarize yourself with the speaking venue.
To the extent possible, specify how you'd like the room arranged, what equipment you need, and what sound system you prefer. Check to make sure all equipment is working before the audience arrives. Here are some questions to consider before any speaking engagement:

- Will you be speaking inside or outside?
- Will the room be large or small?
- Will the area be properly lighted or will you be standing in partial darkness?
- How are the acoustics; will your audience be able to hear you?
- Will a sound system be provided, and does it work?
- What audiovisual equipment is provided?
- How will people be seated?

If you have handouts, determine how they will be distributed to enhance, not distract from, your presentation. If you want the audience to follow along as you make your points, you may want to arrive early and place a handout on every seat. On the other hand, if you prefer that the audience listen rather than read along as you speak, distribute handouts after your presentation.

Organize your presentation.
Present your points in a logical order and decide how much time to devote to each.

Effective speakers determine the points they want to make, speak clearly, and respect the time and attention of their audience. Unless you provide them with summary handouts, the audience only has one chance to grasp your ideas.

Making Your Presentation

Establish eye contact with the audience. Don't look at the ceiling, the podium, or the exit sign at the back of the room. When speaking to a large group, explain your points to one person at a time in every part of the room. Let the audience guide your presentation by watching for signals that they understand, don't understand, or want more information.

Reinforce your message through nonverbal communication. Appropriate facial expressions, gestures, and movements will animate your presentation and keep your audience interested.

Avoid jargon. Opt for the simpler word whenever possible.

Take advantage of audiovisual aids. Chalkboards, flip charts, slides, videos, computer graphics, and other tools help illustrate your points. Just make sure your aids reinforce your message. Another common mistake speakers make is addressing their audiovisuals rather than the audience.

One parent group discovered firsthand the impact of visual communication. They'd been working for months to convince the local school board to renovate their school. Finally, one parent brought a video camera into the school during a heavy rainstorm. Although parents had accurately described the poor condition of the school, a video of classrooms filled with buckets of water from a leaky roof was what finally prompted action.

Involve the audience. Walk into the audience with a hand microphone and ask for opinions, or have them respond to a question through a show of hands or other method. Above all, make audience members active participants instead of passive listeners.

"Can You Say a Few Words?"

Educators often are asked to make impromptu remarks. Here are some suggestions, taken from Joan Detz's book *Can You Say A Few Words?*

- Pause for a few seconds to collect your thoughts.
- Open with a general statement. Don't worry about finding the right anecdote or trying to tell a joke. For example, "We can always use volunteers at our school. This year, we have some new opportunities." This generalization will also give you a few more seconds to organize your thoughts and get the audience used to your speaking style.
- Offer just two or three points of evidence. Don't get bogged down with details—"We've had our last basal reader since 1987, or was it 1986? Well, anyway, we've had it for several years." That approach is not likely to inspire confidence in your listeners. Say instead, "We purchased our last basal reader more than four years ago."
- Look at the whole room—not just the person who asked you to speak.
- Wrap up your remarks with a firm conclusion.
- Once you're done, just stop.
- Carry with you a list of "things I can say with pride" about your school, school system, or school program.

Communicating With a Hostile Audience

Educators frequently have to address controversial or emotional topics. In these situations, an estimated 15 percent of your audience will support your idea, 15 percent will be opposed to it, and 70 percent will be undecided.

Unfortunately, many speakers focus on the 15 percent who disagree with them, when they should be addressing the people who haven't made up their minds.

Arch Lustberg, communications consultant, offers the following advice for educators when they're confronted with a difficult audience:

- Determine what the real question is. For example, if someone asks you, "Why are you stealing and robbing from our kids by spending so much of the budget on school administration?," the real question might be, "What do school administrators do for the money they are paid?" In this case, the response should not be defensive, but should shed light on the administrator's role.
- Avoid repeating negative statements and buzzwords.
- Provide honest, positive information. Saying "I don't know, but I'll find out," is a valid response...as long as you follow through with your promise.

Making Your Words Memorable

Whether you're speaking to inform, entertain, or persuade, you want the audience to remember what you say. Try using some of the following techniques and examples to make your words more memorable.

Use a numbered list. If you have four or six points you want to make, say so. The Ten Commandments are more memorable because they are numbered.

Use comparisons and contrasts. When you compare a point with something familiar to the audience, you bring the point home.

Don't be afraid to repeat yourself. Within reason, make the points you want people to remember more than once. Some speakers use parallels, repeating a stirring, familiar refrain. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech is an effective use of parallels.

Use statistics, but sparingly. Depending on how statistics and hard facts are presented, they can be convincing. While a staccato listing of percentages and figures might put an audience to sleep, a series of well-chosen facts may be just what you need to drive your point home.

Keith Geiger, president of the National Education Association, used hard statistics to emotionally illustrate the plight of many American children:

Every eight seconds of the school day, a child drops out.
Every 26 seconds, a child runs away from home.
Every 46 seconds, a child is abused or neglected.
Every seven minutes, a child is arrested for a drug offense.
Every 36 minutes, a child is killed or injured by a gun.
Every day, 135,000 children bring guns to school.

Use specific examples. A story can paint a word picture and add a touch of reality to the concepts you're trying to communicate.

Former President Ronald Reagan could have used general terms about bravery or courage when he spoke to honor the first men to land at Normandy during World War II. Instead, he described what the first soldiers up the cliffs must have felt:

> *As we stand here today the air is soft and full of sunlight, and if we pause and listen we will hear the snap of flags and the click of cameras and the gentle murmur of people come to visit a place of great sanctity and meaning.*
>
> *But forty years ago at this moment the air was dense with smoke and the cries of men, the air was filled with the crack of rifle fire and the boom of cannons...*
>
> *These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc. These are the men who took the cliffs. These are the champions who helped free a continent. These are the heroes who helped end a war.*

Use humor. "Analyzing humor," author E.B. White once observed, "is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it." Nonetheless, speakers should learn

Public Speaking at a Glance

DO

- Be positive.
- Be honest.
- Prepare and practice.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Stay calm and reasonable.
- Be yourself.

DON'T

- Waste time telling your audience what you don't do or don't believe.
- Lie, make up facts, or pretend to be informed when you aren't.
- Wing it.
- Read or talk to the floor, ceiling, or lectern.
- Argue.
- Be the person you think the audience wants to see—that's acting, and you're not an actor.

Source: *A Winning Speech*, Arch Lustberg Communications

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"Any Questions From the Audience?"

Most speeches conclude with a question-and-answer period. In their book *You Can Talk to (Almost) Anyone about (Almost) Anything,* Elaine Cogan and Ben Padrow offer some pointers for getting through this integral part of any presentation:

- Welcome the question period as an opportunity to add ideas or information you were not able to include in the prepared remarks.
- Unless you know otherwise, assume each questioner has honorable motives and answer him or her respectfully.
- As you get ready for your speech, anticipate some questions and prepare answers for them. What would you be likely to ask if you were in the audience?
- State the ground rules. For example, set a time limit for the entire question period; allow no one to ask a second question until everyone has had a turn; accept questions, not statements, from the audience; and ask questioners to identify themselves.
- Repeat or paraphrase the question to be sure you understand it. This also gives you a few minutes to think about an answer.

how to use humor to their advantage...and how not to use it.

Humor puts an audience at ease. But be careful never to use a joke or anecdote that could be perceived as prejudiced toward any race, sex, or group.

Furthermore, no humor is far better than inappropriate humor. A joke that obviously is borrowed from a book, movie, or other source, with no connection to the audience or topic, is not worth including. And as communications consultant Roger Ailes observes, "If you're not a humorous person in life, the chance of you becoming funny once a month for 15 minutes during a speech is probably not too good."

A collection of appropriate anecdotes, interesting facts, or quotations, however, is a valuable resource for any public speaker. Sources of this material include:

- *Chase's Annual Events* (a listing of famous dates in history as well as current activities ranging from National Chemistry Week to National Egg Salad Week—the week after Easter, of course)
- *The Little Brown Book of Anecdotes*
- *Peter's Quotations: Ideas for Our Time*
- Daily newspapers and magazines.

Avoid plagiarism. If you are using someone else's material, give the author credit. Also, using the same material over and over again, especially with the same audience, quickly becomes a turnoff.

Pace yourself.

Woodrow Wilson once was asked how long he needed to prepare a five-minute speech on a vital topic. He answered about three weeks. But when asked how long it would take him to prepare a two-hour address, Wilson said, "I'm ready now."

Today, people are more attuned to the rapid pace of television than to Wilson's lengthy speeches. Speakers need to include memorable "sound bites" in their presentations. Good speakers also break up a lengthy speech into shorter, more digestible segments.

Some subjects, however, simply require more time to present adequately. Getting the audience involved is one strategy for keeping them interested. In a class, that might mean following up a lecture with a student discussion and then a short video clip. In an inservice session, a leader could vary presentations to include hands-on activities, such as role playing and small-group discussions. Seminars or lengthy presentations lasting most of a day should be broken up with breaks, as well.

Use your voice.

When you're speaking in public, your voice is your instrument. A well-modulated voice makes ideas come alive.

Varying the rate, pitch, intensity, and quality of your voice will enhance communication in any situation. A faster rate of expression causes excitement, but when coupled with a higher pitch, could cause panic during a crisis. When calm is needed, try speaking with a slower voice.

How loudly should you speak? In an article for *The Executive Educator,* Ellen Ficklen, an education writer, says a speaker's goal should be a voice that "sounds natural and enthusiastic—a style in which the emphasis falls on the right words, your voice doesn't drop off at the end of sentences, and you triumph over annoying speech habits (uh, umm, y'know)."

Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident...Remember this as a consolation in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard.

***—William Zinsser,* On Writing Well**

WRITING SKILLS

People today are bombarded with reading material. A school's written communications must compete with bills, newspapers, magazines, direct mail packages—even the backs of cereal boxes.

Most people receive more printed material than they can handle in a typical day, so they have to choose what to read. Some material gets read carefully. Other material is skimmed quickly. And still other material is tossed in the trash—without a glance.

How do you ensure your writing gets read carefully? First, make it clear and easy to read. Second, make sure the reader personally benefits from your material.

For example, after reading a letter, memo, or community newsletter, a parent may learn about a school open house, a teacher may better understand a new grading procedure, or a community member may be motivated to volunteer for a local school activity.

Getting Started

Know your audience.

Just as in speaking, it is vital to understand your intended audience before you write one word. Your writing has no objective if you don't know who your audience members are and what you want them to do.

Suppose your board asks you to prepare a brochure for students explaining new rules for behavior during field trips. What specifically do you and the board hope to accomplish with this brochure—to simply communicate the new rules or to communicate the rules and have students comply with

Bureaucratically Speaking

In the 1970s, Mike Royko said educatorese—that mysterious language professional educators use to befuddle the rest of us—consists of words and phrases that don't make any sense, but sound like they do.

The following rules from James Scarnati, principal of Chautauqua, New York, Junior-Senior High School, make it easy for anyone to use educatorese:

1. Write down four numbers between 1 and 20.

2. Use the first number to select a word from Column 1, the second number to select a word from Column 2, and so on. Thus, if you chose the numbers 11, 19, 20, and 3, you would have the phrase "authorized educational compensation mission."

3. Take four words or various four-word combinations and use them in a sentence. Choose from more than 150,000 possible combinations.

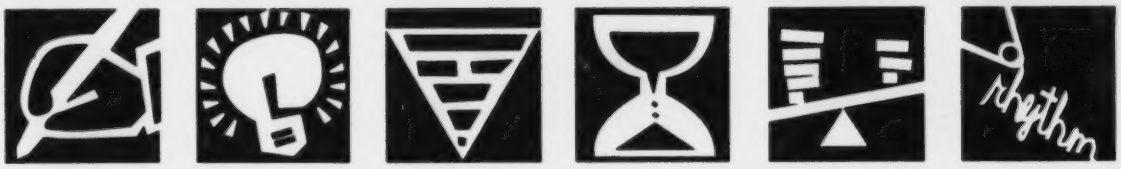
Word Combinations

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4
1. articulated	1. organization	1. outcome	1. criteria
2. heterogeneous	2. transitional	2. issues	2. concept
3. balanced	3. alternative	3. accessibility	3. mission
4. collaborative	4. site-based	4. liability	4. philosophy
5. standardized	5. top-down	5. capability	5. policy
6. negotiated	6. structural	6. productivity	6. shortfall
7. personalized	7. holistic	7. consensus	7. assessment
8. cooperative	8. systematic	8. logistics	8. evaluation
9. disciplined	9. differential	9. feasibility	9. procedure
10. diversified	10. thematic	10. contingency	10. coalition
11. authorized	11. interdependent	11. constituency	11. statement
12. cohesive	12. executive	12. austerity	12. study
13. synergistic	13. administrative	13. infrastructure	13. protocol
14. cognitive	14. interpersonal	14. pedagogical	14. variable
15. supervised	15. unilateral	15. compatibility	15. guideline
16. comprehensive	16. nontraditional	16. accountability	16. mandate
17. computerized	17. management	17. continuum	17. resolution
18. enhanced	18. statistical	18. enterprise	18. time-line
19. certified	19. educational	19. reciprocity	19. certificate
20. criterion-referenced	20. institutional	20. compensation	20. proposal

Congratulations! Now you're ready for some advanced techniques:

- Start a memo with a strong or urgent opening sentence, such as "It is very important that we discuss the topic of criterion-referenced transitional accessibility resolution (20, 2, 3, 17) in our organization."
- Use the body of the memo to expand upon the subject with other official, yet meaningless word combinations.
- End the memo with an emphatic, forceful statement that gives directions, such as "I believe it is important that we address this topic as soon as possible."

One word of caution. Make sure the persons to whom you address this memo have a sense of humor. Otherwise, they may spend countless hours developing a "diversified organizational pedagogical policy."



them? Either of these distinct goals for your brochure requires a specific type of copy.

Organize your thoughts.
Although mystery novels save the most important information for last, other forms of writing should state a purpose in the opening paragraphs. Journalists try to answer the essential five W's—Who? What? Where? When? Why?—in the first paragraph (some writers add a sixth question—How?).

Many writers make a rough outline before writing to organize their thoughts. Another journalism technique known as the "inverted pyramid"—putting the most important information in the lead and then adding other information according to its order of importance—also helps organize material.

Watch out for jargon.
The advice about avoiding jargon is just as true for writing as it is for speaking.

William Lutz of Rutgers University advises, "The best thing to do is to put yourself in the reader's place...This language has become so much a part of you that you'll find certain phrases come trippingly off your tongue—like calling a hallway a 'behavior transition corridor.'"

Be concise.
The time readers invest in your writing is precious—don't waste it! The average reader has an attention span of roughly 60 seconds. Consider these words of advice from *Advertising/Communication Times:* "Conciseness promotes readability. The less you write, the more likely your reader will pay you the ultimate compliment and read what you've written."

Redundancy cheats your readers by delaying a story's payoff and rehashing material already covered. Here's a list of redundant phrases to watch for:

- accomplishments, *not* past accomplishments
- alternative, *not* other alternative
- another, *not* another additional
- began, *not* first began
- benefits, *not* desirable benefits

- cancel, *not* cancel out
- combined, *not* combined together
- consensus, *not* consensus of opinion
- cooperation, *not* joint cooperation
- enclosed, *not* enclosed herewith
- except, *not* with the exception of
- experience, *not* past experience
- fundamentals, *not* basic fundamentals
- history, *not* past history
- join, *not* join together
- outcome, *not* final outcome
- postpone, *not* postpone until later
- probably, *not* in all probability
- revert, *not* revert back
- trend, *not* current trend.

Be positive.
Negative statements make your readers work harder to get your meaning. In fact, research shows that readers need an additional one-third of a second to process a negative statement.

Negative: We will not allow students to participate until signed permission slips are returned.

Revised: Students may participate as soon as signed permission slips are returned.

Writing for Clarity

Simplify, simplify. In his book *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser calls clutter—meaningless jargon, circular constructions, pompous frills—the disease of American writing. "The secret of good writing," he says, "is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components."

Control average sentence length.
Try to balance long, medium, and short sentences so your writing flows rhythmically. While many people get confused when confronted with several lengthy sentences in a row, they also get bored with a series of short, choppy sentences.

What Are They Trying To Say?

"Just because people work for an institution, they don't have to write like one," says William Zinsser. Educators shouldn't be afraid to show their human side in letters, memos, articles, and other writing. Parents and others will welcome this "plain talk." Would parents in your district be able to decipher the following memo?

> As per your request, dated November 14, for an informational meeting concerning the educational progress of your son/ daughter, please advise us regarding your recommendation for the scheduling of a conference.

Here's the same memo, translated into plain English, with a positive closing sentence added:

> As you requested, we would like to meet with you to discuss your child's academic progress. Please call to schedule a conference at a convenient time for you.
>
> Parents play an important role in their children's education. We look forward to working with you.

Varying sentence lengths also produces a good average sentence length, a major factor that helps readers understand you:

Average Sentence Length (in words)	Readability Rating	Readers Reached
Up to 8	Very easy	90%
11	Fairly easy	86%
17	Standard	75%
21	Fairly difficult	40%
25	Difficult	24%
29 & up	Very difficult	4.5%

Note the dramatic readership loss as the number rises above the standard 17-word average you should strive for in most business writing.

To compute your average sentence length, follow these two steps:

Step 1: Count a sample of about 100 words. Keep counting until you get to the end of a complete sentence.

Step 2: Count the number of sentences. You'll make the job easier if you put a slash mark at the end of each sentence as you count the words, which allows you to quickly count the slash marks for the total number of sentences. Divide the sentence total into the word count to get the average sentence length. Example: Your sample contains 106 words and five sentences. Divide 106 by 5 and you get a 21.2 average sentence length.

Use active vs. passive voice.

As a general rule, avoid using passive verbs. In the passive voice, "the subject is acted on by the verb" (The papers were graded by the teacher, The assembly was called by the principal). This construction usually clutters up sentences with unnecessary words.

Passive verbs create ambiguous subjects that force readers to recode what you write back to the active voice so they can understand you. Note how the active voice makes this sentence clearer and stronger:

Passive: Extra help in certain subjects is needed.

Active: Students need extra help in certain subjects.

Worse still, many organizations use the passive voice to avoid taking responsibility for an action—even if that action is positive!

Passive: To make it easy for senior citizens to participate in the program, a simple admissions procedure has been devised.

Did your school devise the procedure? If so, take credit for it.

Active: Merryville High School officials have devised a simple admissions procedure to make it easy for senior citizens to participate in the program.

Eliminating Sexism From Your Writing

As a language and its people change and grow, writers and editors are challenged to make the language work in the interest of universal communication. To avoid sexism when communicating, *On Equal Terms,* a booklet produced for employees of the Correctional Service in Ottawa, Ontario, suggests asking yourself:

- Do you describe the women you write about in greater physical detail than the men you write about?
- Do you routinely provide information about the marital status of the women you write about, but not about the men?
- Have you ever written about or introduced a woman using only her husband's name —Mrs. Brian Murphy?

The generic "man." In *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers,* Casey Miller and Kate Swift argue that the generic use of the term man can lead to false, awkward, even amusing statements.

Here are some suggestions for handling these words:

Instead of	Use
man and wife	husband and wife
manpower	work force
manned	staffed
chairman	chair
spokesman	company representative
fireman	firefighter

The offensive pronoun. How can you avoid sexist writing when faced with a singular pronoun for correct agreement, as in the sentence, "Every student should return to his homeroom"? William Zinsser offers the following suggestions:

Use the plural: All students should return to their homerooms.

Use "or": Every student should return to his or her homeroom. But use this option sparingly as it can quickly become cumbersome: Every student should return to his or her homeroom and tell his or her teacher that his or her bus was delayed.

Use the first person: You should return to your homeroom.

What matters most is to write and edit with a sense of equality for both sexes. As writers and editors, you should feel obligated to avoid a potentially sexist word or phrase.

Used sparingly, however, the passive voice can add needed emphasis to a sentence. In this sentence, the passive voice might be appropriate if you're writing a letter to the Ace Company and want to stress the actual award, rather than the individual receiving it:

The annual Ace Company Scholarship Award was presented to Fran Jones.

Odds and ends.
Use this collection of grammatical points and helpful tips to further improve your writing.

Weak starts. Starting a sentence with a weak "there is" or "there are" usually results in indefinite, turgid sentences (particularly when this construction is coupled with a passive verb).

Original: There are not many principals who can present a report on this subject in so precise a manner.
Better: Few principals can report on this subject precisely.

Original: There is no reason that can explain why the recruiting plan failed.
Better: We cannot explain why the recruiting plan failed.

Frequently, these weak structures are imbedded in a sentence:
Original: As we begin the year, there are several key issues confronting our students.
Better: As we begin the year, several key issues confront our students.

Wasted verbs. You'll get the most out of your writing if you avoid burying a sentence's action in a noun or an adjective. When you change the noun or adjective to a verb, you add vigor and cut excess words. In short, state the action instead of simply stating the action exists. The crucial actions in the sentences below aren't "produce" or "show," but "disappoint" and "involve."

Original: The annual report produced a disappointed reaction among the parents.
Better: The annual report disappointed the parents.

Original: Evidence shows that parental involvement can be beneficial to us in implementation of the program.
Better: Evidence shows us that involving parents helps us implement the program.

TIP: If you use a word processing program, use the search function to find words that end in -ion, -ance, -ment, -ence, and -ing. These endings frequently indicate nominalizations—a noun derived from a verb or adjective. Nominalizations lead to wordy sentences, weak verbs, and other problems.

Too many prepositions. Remember this short rule for tighter prose: Excise excess prepositions.

You can eliminate many small words by using adjectives instead of prepositional phrases:

Original: The editor of the school newsletter recently received an award for writing.

Better: The school newsletter editor recently received a writing award.

The revision drops the needless "of the" and "for." It uses "school, newsletter, and writing" as adjectives to describe editor and award. Note that the meaning does not change.

Revision

"Few writers," say writers James Strunk and E. B. White in the *Elements of Style,* "are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try."

Ideally, writers should leave themselves enough time to put a piece aside for a few hours or even a day. Coming back with fresh eyes, a writer usually spots problems passed over earlier. Do all the ideas flow logically? Why not? Are all the words understandable? Does the piece have a beginning, middle, and end, or is something important missing? Elmore Leonard, a contemporary novelist, has this advice: "If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it."

As you're revising, look for other ways to tighten and shorten what you've written. Louis Bergman, former editor of *The New York Times Magazine,* once observed almost no piece of writing— except the haiku— can't benefit from a little cutting.

A 1985 article for *The Executive Educator* outlined some other quick checks to help you revise:

- Read your writing aloud. You'll probably discover a few sour notes and rough transitions.
- Underline the main points of your finished writing. Have you included all your ideas and enough backup information for each idea?
- Check every long sentence. If the reader might get lost in one of them, break it into several shorter sentences. Also watch for complicated sentence structures and confusing clauses.

Proofreading.

Checking spelling, grammar, and accuracy is the essential last step. A school trying to convince the community of its high standards for student work should make sure its own writing is free of misspelled words and grammatical errors.

The spell-check feature on many word processing programs is a great time-saver, but it doesn't replace a careful human edit. A spell check wouldn't catch the errors in this sentence: "Principals should submit there reports next weak."

Where To Turn

The following books are handy references for grammar, punctuation, and style questions:

- *The Elements of Style*, William Strunk and E.B. White (required reading for every writer)
- *The Careful Writer*, Theodore Bernstein
- *The Chicago Manual of Style*
- *Words into Type*, Marjorie E. Skillin and Robert M. Gray
- *Help Yourself: A Guide to Writing and Rewriting*, Marylu Mattson, Sophia Leshing, and Elaine Levi.

A LIFETIME SKILL

Improving your communication is an ongoing effort. These tips and suggestions should give you a start, but the only way to communicate better is to keep communicating.

Communication is never the same; what worked in one situation may be inappropriate in another. Try to learn from successful and not-so-successful experiences. What went wrong? What can you do differently next time? What was especially effective?

Whatever form of communication you're engaged in—explaining fractions to a third-grader, helping a parent understand a school policy, or convincing the school board to adopt a new science text—remember that you're developing a lifetime skill.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Speaking and Writing Skills for Educators is a publication of the American Association of School Administrators, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209.

Author Kristen Amundson is a leading education writer in the Washington, D.C., area. Her previous AASA publications include *101 Ways Parents Can Help Students Achieve* and *Getting Your Child Ready for School,* among others.

Special thanks to Ed Moore and Don Bagin of *Communication Briefings* in Blackwood, New Jersey, for their contributions to the writing section. Arch Lustberg, a Washington, D.C.-based communication consultant, provided insight and ideas to the speaking section. AASA also is grateful to the many writers and educators cited throughout this booklet.

Harry Roberts, information services coordinator for the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, reviewed and commented on the manuscript.

Gary Marx, AASA senior associate executive director, served as project director. Leslie Eckard, publications manager, and Katie Ross, communications assistant, edited the manuscript and directed its production.

Graphic design was provided by Lea Croteau Bartlett of East Woods Studio.

1801 North Moore Street
Arlington, Virginia 22209
(703) 528-0700